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REVIEW: BILGE KARASU, *A LONG DAY'S EVENING*. TRANSLATED FROM THE TURKISH BY ARON AJI AND FRED STARK. CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, SAN FRANCISCO, CA. ISBN 978-0-87286-591-4

Bilge Karasu (1930- 1995), nearly a generation younger than Orhan Pamuk (b. 1952) and closer in age to Yashir Kemal (b. 1923), seems in retrospect to be emerging as one of the more interesting Turkish writers of the 2nd half of the twentieth century. Four of his novels are now available in English translation. *Night*, the last of these, is a dense parable written in response to a 1980 coup; it is set in a Kafkaesque landscape and perhaps the least accessible of the group. In 1991 however, *Night* won a Pegasus Prize for Literature and was the first to be translated into English. The earlier books appeared with English translations, mostly by Aaron Aji, after Karasu's death – *Death in Troy* (2002), *The Garden of Departed Cats* (2003) and now finally, *A Long Day's Evening*.

The novels share certain preoccupations; all deal to some degree with repressed or thwarted homosexual relationships. Authorities are nearly always agents of persecution, forces to be resisted or from which to escape. Women are scarce, appearing mostly as possessive or suspicious wives or mothers. Cats are subtle but ubiquitous; in *A Long Day's Evening* they are absent from 8th Century Constantinople and Rome but appear at once in modern Istanbul. Chronologies overlap and are sometimes difficult to follow; critical information is occasionally withheld; major characters act in unexpected sometimes perverse ways. The two early novels are set in real places at particular times in history amid landscapes that are convincingly described. The later books are set on imagined terrain, in provincial cities in countries that go unnamed. As Aaron Aji has admitted they are “very mean books...very difficult books to read” but ultimately gratifying.

A Long Day's Evening is structured rather simply as two long narratives, *The Island and The Hill*, both set in the mid 8th Century, followed by *The Mulberry Trees*, a short reminiscence of Istanbul in the early 1960s. “The Island” begins in the dark, with dawn approaching and the monk Andronikos rowing through the Sea of Marmara towards what is almost certainly Büyükada, the largest of the Princes' Islands. With a boatload of supplies he has secretly fled his monastery rather than “re-nounce the old belief” in the sanctity of icons. Andronikos, we learn, is thirty-three, the same age as Christ when he died “on a hill in Palestine,

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unaware that he had changed the world...” He has left behind a young friend, Ioakim, “sweet-tempered “ blond and shy. After beaching the boat in a cove, Andronikos explores, swims for a time, and then begins a climb to the summit. As he makes his way up through rocky scrub, he reflects on recent events and his decision, reached after agonized brooding, to escape. He finds a vestige of a trail and then pine woods and a clearing from which, from a viewpoint atop a rock, he can see, “The sea. The blue, wide calm, shimmering sea. Blue. Singular, defiant, solitary, a shade that overpowers the blue of Mother Mary’s cloak as depicted in the paintings. Blue, without the red, the green or the gold.” He continues towards the summit, and higher up, he can see the sea again and the distant city where “among the domes, black clouds of smoke rise through the mist.” Old fears return: “Perhaps they’re burning the icons, the monasteries of the resistant monks who refuse to embrace the new creed, perhaps the houses in the acrimonious neighborhoods that had defied the edict in the early days.”

Tortured by doubts and frightful recollections, he descends through “an ever-deepening sea of pine, vibrant, sonorous, as if it were the dwelling place of all the island’s chirring insects, all the songbirds.” Amid this natural beauty he finds a spring, drinks, and resolves to “grow a little garden for himself...” He returns to the beach, determined to “resist despair, remorse, the sense of defeat lying in wait for him behind the rocks...to prevail, to move forward.” At dusk, he dreams of finding on the island the ruins of an Imperial palace and its garden with trees that “are loaded with plums, cherries, pears, apples. Radiant with ripe colors but wild from neglect, the trees calmly sway to the rhythm of the wind...” Waking, he realizes that he is nonetheless alone. He questions whether he still believes in God, and then, “Feeling his aching hipbones pressed against the gravel, he thinks of Ioakim.”

“The Hill” is a parallel account set in Rome five decades later. Ioakim, now seventy, is beginning to climb the Aventine Hill as he has done “rainy or cold, evening after evening for years.” He reflects on Andronikos, “perhaps the first person he felt close to...the first he began loving, the first he trusted, depended on.” Passing the ruins of the Colosseum, “now no more than a desolate abandoned ditch” caught in a “swampy, muddy, reed-filled, infested sleep,” he also wonders whether in Constantinople the Hippodrome would suffer the same fate. Mosquitoes infest the reed beds [from which would rise the “villainous miasma” that Henry James used to seal the fate of Daisy Miller.]

Higher up, at the edge of a wood, Ioakim had experienced each

evening the difficult emotions of the first time he “had tasted the fear of dying in agony” and began “the task of exhausting life.” At the center of these lay the fate of Andronikos, and the question “Was Andronikos a hero?” What he has then seen each night has been an iconic vision of Byzantium/Constantinople [*here and occasionally elsewhere the text is written as poetry*]: “Further out at the foot of the next hill/in the place of Palatinus, a sea almost the color of lapis-lazuli/This image is particularly stubborn. Yes, it is blue, but his eyes, his being, want a different shade of blue, one commonly used by painters; something inside him is shouting, screaming for this other view. The three arms of the sea [*perhaps the Golden Horn, the Bosphorus, and the Sea of Marmara*] in the arms of the three-armed city/ Eyes closed again, he is thinking of the blue. With all his mental energy, only the blue...” This night, however, the Roman landscape remains stubbornly itself. He climbs higher, first through “light held in perfect balance, teetering...” And then that light fades: “Even the sky cannot withstand the terracotta shades of dusk/Just like every evening/ Joakim thinks it’s time to begin descending./...But this evening, it seems as though he wants to see something else. He will not descend before he sees it”

What he sees, recalls, is the death of Andronikos. After an evening mass, Andronikos had appeared again in Constantinople, “his gaze fixed on the smooth curtain/ that for the past few months has covered the niches that contained the icons/ his steady voice declaring ‘I have come to renounce the oath.’” The punishment comes swiftly and seemed at first like “an elaborate joke ill becoming the abbot, out of place in the grave solemnity of a monastery.” Andronikos would be made to talk himself to death and as he did so, Ioakim would be made to serve as witness. In Rome as he descends the Aventine, Ioakim broods over these events, still wonders if Andronikos understood the reasons for his punishment, still asks himself “All these old questions, are they not like certain key themes in a book being summarized, enumerated, on the last pages so that they’re not wasted or forgotten” Most persistent though was why he, Ioakim, had been made to stand watch over this bizarre and cruel execution, “to sleep before the one who was kept awake, to remain silent before the one who was forced to sleep.” Over the years he has come to believe that he was being punished for “the vague hint of a certain friendship,” because such “punishment, when shared, is twice as heavy.”

Back at the foot of the hill in near darkness, Ioakim lingers outside the monastery: “He wants to feel the cold, to tremble, beyond any hope for warmth. There are still unfinished matters. He cannot go

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inside.” Ioakim relives again the death agonies of Andronikos, nine days of horror, recollected in detail. Only then do we learn that years before Ioakim has also fled from Constantinople, first to Ravenna, then to Rome where “the Grand Bishop... the enemy of Byzantium” would grant asylum, and that only the previous morning had a messenger arrived from Constantinople with news that “the new Emperor was relaxing the old laws “ and would soon revoke them altogether. Ioakim has resolved to share this news with the community, which he seemingly heads; “then, he should say, I didn’t leave Byzantium because I saw nothing that could be done there; rather I escaped because I did not want to do anything./ Then he should say the one thing that will entirely confound them:...I will unite this church with the church of Rome, then retreat to my cell to await my death....The book is finished. The shutters are drawn. Peace is made./Without fame, without honor...Is God not going to take my life?”

From 8th Century Rome, *The Mulberry Trees*, moves abruptly to Istanbul in June of 1960 and a narrator, apparently the author, who is walking, not up a hill, but to a post office down a street lined with mulberry trees. He recalls an incident from his childhood--in May of 1938-- a conversation between his father and his piano teacher. Giulia, the teacher, was a fugitive from Fascist Italy and her elusive husband Gigi, somewhat reminiscent of the youthful Ioakim (as seen in a photo, “His hair must have been quite fair”) has fled to Argentina. Giulia has refused to join him: “He was handsome, brave, cheerful, full of humor, but how could he have fought Mussolini’s gang from half a world away?” She had just been summoned to the Italian consulate for questioning about several things, including Gigi’s whereabouts, possibly at the urging of the Germans. As she angrily described her interview with “the *scorpionista*” the child , her student, had leafed through a magazine and found “a smoking, dusty, thick-browed, great-eyed, bloody-bandaged picture from a glorious battle won by the united troops of Franco and Mussolini, all of them tassel-capped.”

Putting these thoughts aside only briefly, the author notes that the trees, defoliated by caterpillars less than a month before, have leafed out and are green again. In May, under these same trees, there were indications of imminent trouble: soldiers “waiting with rifles stacked... laughing and talking, very softly, but still, louder than the caterpillars. A mile or more off in the square they were milling, singing, being chased, running, absorbing blows, being arrested, not fearing...Letters were arriving late, foreign papers and magazines not at all.” It seemed possible that the soldiers would get an order to open fire: “Near the end of April

they had opened fire in Ankara, then Istanbul, one day apart. The anger had swollen. There was still marching, there was still singing....” but “The songs, the beatings, the scatterings, chasing, shouts, all stopped a half mile away. He had gone into the post office, beset by caterpillars dropping from above. When he came out, “In the square a mile away, the number of arrests was increasing.”

The final pages of the book, on that June day, just one month later, are surprisingly optimistic. Following a great deluge, the soldiers are gone; and the trees have put out new leaves: “There were more songs. These songs will bring back memories, those songs that gave an answer to the others, which had thought that a great river could halt, that the Danube might cease to flow....Once again I look at the leaves....there they are, holding the sun away. And OF COURSE the Danube flows.”

It would seem impossible to put away the novel without wondering why Karasu decided to link *The Mulberry Trees* to the earlier passages. These can be read as intense and complex inner dialogues around the themes of escape versus confrontation— or of obedience and rebellion - or of love and its rejection or denial- or of faith and doubt - or of all of these as they play out in the narrative. One can also take comfort in Steven Runciman’s caution that “... no one who has not been nurtured in the atmosphere of the Orthodox Church is in a position to understand it fully, still less to describe it.”¹ Nonetheless, a look at some modern history also may be helpful. *The Island and The Hill* were completed in 1964-65 but *A Long Day’s Evening* was not published in Turkey until 1971, the year a “coup by memorandum”, delivered by the military, again had replaced a democratically elected government. *The Mulberry Trees* takes place in Istanbul in June of 1960; the date is critical: most Turkish readers would remember that an earlier coup d’état had occurred in May of that year, replacing another democratically elected government.

From what one knows of the following decade, including the painful memories of the 1980 coup that underlie the text of *Night*, one returns to the author/narrator’s earlier qualms, asking “In order to survive, the trees did what that summer required, in spite of the caterpillars. But there is still a question. Will they be able, now that their berries have fallen, been crushed, will they be able to bear them again? For this year, at least, the trees have no need of berries. But will they make that effort too?” Apparently much of Karasu’s best writing, including a number of short stories, has not yet been translated; one hopes to see this work in English soon.

1. Runciman, Steven. 1968. *The Great Church in Captivity*. Cambridge University Press.